

The Chronicle of Higher Education

From the issue dated February 20, 2009

A Scholarship Program Where Students Give Back

By KATHRYN MASTERSON

When A. Damian Williams earned a \$40,000 scholarship from the Ron Brown Scholar Program, he got more than the \$10,000 a year to help pay his tuition bill at Harvard University. He gained entry into an elite club of students tagged as the next generation of African-American leaders.

Now 241 strong, the Ron Brown scholars — named after the former U.S. Secretary of Commerce who died in a plane crash in 1996 — are showing what an education, when combined with a supportive peer group, dedicated mentors, and networking opportunities at the highest levels, can yield.

These young adults, selected for their intellect, leadership skills, service, and financial need, are finding success in the law, government, science, business, medicine, and the arts. Yet they remain tied to the scholarship program, contributing to its continued success by donating money and volunteer hours to create opportunities for others.

This culture of philanthropy is helping the Ron Brown program grow in strength and scope. Unlike more-traditional scholarships whose main objective is awarding money, the creators of this program envisioned a community of scholars linked for life and motivated to give back — to society, each other, and the program — as members moved ahead in their professions. Their motto: "the value of one, the power of all."

Many colleges talk about instilling a culture of philanthropy in their alumni, but it is not easily achieved. The Ron Brown program hits on what philanthropy experts say are some key ingredients: It fosters a spirit of belonging, offers a way to contribute to social change, and provides a continued value in graduates' lives. Although the program is relatively young and its alumni base small, its success in encouraging a giveback culture may offer lessons for other institutions looking to strengthen alumni ties and donations.

"I think it's the best scholarship program in America," says Mr. Williams, who also attended the University of Cambridge and Yale Law School and is now clerking for Justice John Paul Stevens of the Supreme Court. "People think of it as lifelong, and people take it seriously."

One of the things that makes the program special, scholars say, is its sense of family — an attitude that starts at the top.

Michael A. Mallory, a gregarious former teacher, coach, and director of minority recruitment at the University of Virginia, helped start the program with the philanthropist Anthony M. Pilaro

and has served as its executive director since the first class of 20 scholars was chosen in 1997. He loves working with the students and talks frequently of his pride in the challenges they have overcome and the accomplishments they have achieved. Watching him interact with the scholars, it is clear the affection and respect go both ways.

Like many of the scholars he assists, Mr. Mallory was the first in his family to go to college. One of 10 children, he lived until his teen years in a two-room house in rural Virginia with no running water. Even though his family was barely scraping by, he remembers his father and mother giving vegetables from their garden to people who needed food.

Their generosity helped shape his view of philanthropy. "Everybody wants to give in some way," he says. "You just have to give them the opportunity to do it."

From the first time Mr. Mallory meets the scholarship applicants, he makes an effort to get to know them personally. Errol C. Saunders II, a 2006 Yale University graduate, remembers Mr. Mallory picking him up at the airport after he flew cross-country for his scholarship interview, then treating him to hamburgers and shakes. While at Yale, Mr. Saunders called Mr. Mallory for advice about renting a tuxedo for concert band (Mr. Mallory suggested he buy one instead, since he would need it often) and how to handle a family emergency (Mr. Mallory recommended he fly home, which the program helped pay for).

Mr. Saunders chose teaching over law school because of a summer job suggested by the Ron Brown staff. And after college, Mr. Saunders, now a teacher in a New Haven middle school, turned to Mr. Mallory for guidance about buying a condo and serving on a nonprofit board.

"Whenever I have a situation where I don't have anybody else to talk to," Mr. Saunders says, "I can call Mike Mallory."

Other scholars know that if they call Mr. Mallory, they have a good chance of reaching him. He's always got his cellphone — he carries a backup just in case — and he spends a sizable portion of his day working the phones, making calls to past and present scholars and following leads on prospective supporters for the program. A skillful networker, Mr. Mallory is continually on the lookout for opportunities for students and graduates: summer jobs, internships, job possibilities, and people they should meet. Many scholars say he helped them find their first job.

Now, as the program matures, Mr. Mallory is wearing two hats: mentor for the students and fund raiser for the program. His passion and persistence, which have helped him as a program director, lend themselves well to generating private support.

"I don't take no for an answer with stuff that's right," Mr. Mallory says. "If it's right, I'll keep calling on people until it's done."

Part of the program's fund raising is done through the scholars. Last year more than 80 percent of the students who had already graduated gave a total of \$45,000 to the program. Forty eight of the 80 current scholars also donated money. The act is more important than the amount: Mr. Mallory believes that even people who don't have much should give something, even if it is \$5 or \$10.

He also asks scholars to give their time. Between work and studying, they find space in their schedules to be mentors for younger students, help one another, and promote the program to new audiences at "cultivation" events around the country. At those gatherings, which Mr. Mallory refers to as "friend raising," scholars mingle with guests while staff members show a video of students' stories and discuss a book of their essays, printed on the program's 10-year anniversary, called *I Have Risen*.

"That full circle of giving back to the program was absolutely one of the goals from the outset," says Chris Pilaro, son of Anthony Pilaro and head of the CAP Charitable Foundation, the family foundation that has been the program's primary benefactor.

Scholars can give back through the alumni association, a volunteer organization run by the program's graduates, or by volunteering during the annual selection-weekend interviews. In addition, numerous informal contacts with staff members and other alumni help reinforce the bonds of the Ron Brown family and highlight current needs.

The most pressing need is related to the ailing economy. The Ron Brown program's endowment, established two years ago with private gifts from foundations and individuals, has lost about a quarter of its value, dropping to about \$9-million. Although the CAP Foundation covers operating expenses for the program, Mr. Mallory is cutting costs, including putting off hiring a dedicated fund raiser and reducing the scholarships offered for 2009.

In December, Mr. Mallory sent scholars an e-mail message with the subject line "sad news," describing how the economy was hurting the endowment and had prompted a difficult cut. He told them that the program will only be able to offer 10 scholarships instead of the usual 20, and the program needed their help. Concerned scholars e-mailed back the same day, asking what they could do.

Record Interest

At the same time, the program received a record number of applicants this year — 10,400, or more than a thousand for each slot.

Mr. Mallory and the program's associate director, Vanessa M. Evans, shared that news on a recent Thursday evening with a dozen scholars who had gathered at a fancy Washington law firm to catch up and be briefed on the program's progress.

The scholars in attendance, dressed in stylish suits, greeted one another with hugs and chatted about their recent activities, including what they had done for the inauguration. Before discussing highlights from the program's annual report, Mr. Mallory asked the scholars to describe what they were doing professionally and in their communities. Some described plans for graduate school, while others talked about doing research at the National Institutes of Health or working in the Obama administration. One scholar said she had recently started snowboarding and wanted to start a nonprofit group to introduce kids to the sport.

For Ihotu J. Ali, who just moved to Washington to work for Rep. Tom Perriello, Democrat of Virginia, the evening was a chance to reconnect with the program and share the news of her job.

She attended Macalester College, in Minnesota, then moved to Arizona, where she says she felt isolated from the other Ron Brown scholars and the program because they are concentrated on the East Coast (the program's office is in Charlottesville, Va.) and in California. In early December, Mr. Mallory was in Arizona, and the two met for lunch. She remembers the program's leader telling her that she needed to feel comfortable wherever she went, and that she should tell herself she belonged there.

She reminded herself of that advice on her first day on Capitol Hill. "Who I am deserves that spot as much as anybody else," she told herself.

A Leadership Role

Marquise J. McGraw, another scholar in attendance, told his fellow graduates that he was working at the Federal Aviation Administration as an economist and applying to Ph.D. programs. He is also working as an SAT tutor for kids unable to afford private test preparation, and is set to start a term as the Ron Brown Scholar Alumni Association treasurer. "I will be looking for your dues," Mr. McGraw told the group. (The association has suggested minimum annual dues of \$25.)

Even on the tight budget of a young government worker, giving back to the program is a "no-brainer" worth sacrificing for, says Mr. McGraw, who grew up in public housing in the Bronx and graduated from Cornell University.

Years ago a teacher tried to set his expectations low, saying he shouldn't expect higher than a C average at a selective science high school because he was unprepared for high-level work. He didn't listen, instead earning A's and volunteering as a tutor to help other needy students.

That persistence led Mr. Mallory to see big things for Mr. McGraw. "He stayed focused with so much chaos in his life," Mr. Mallory says.

Mr. McGraw says he and his mentor talk about once a month, and he knows he can always count on Mr. Mallory to call back. "That's just a level of dedication that inspires me to want to be that kind of person to someone else one day," he says. "Mr. Mallory sees something in me I don't see in myself."

After a lunch late last year, Mr. Mallory offered to pay for a cab for Mr. McGraw (he declined). The offer was an echo of one of his first interactions with Mr. Mallory, who took Mr. McGraw aside on selection weekend, gave him \$20, and told him to go have fun. Mr. McGraw says he first thought Mr. Mallory was sending him home.

The young economist says he wants to do research on economic and educational inequality, issues he has seen up close and is passionate about fixing. He also plans to keep giving to the Ron Brown Scholar Program.

"One day, I'm going to get to the point where I can send in a thousand bucks, 10 thousand bucks, maybe one million bucks," Mr. McGraw says. "And trust me, I will."

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: Money & Management

Volume 55, Issue 24, Page A1